

LABUDDE FAMILY COLLECTION

Wilhelmine LaBudde

CONSERVATION ADVOCATE, LADY OF LETTERS

Fiesty determination brought conservation education to the classroom.

*Christine L. Thomas
Editor's note:
Our second look at the
individuals, concepts and
issues that shaped our
conservation heritage.*

I was privileged to spend the summer of 1989 with a great woman. Actually, I spent the summer at the State Historical Society with her personal papers. Day after day, page after yellow page, the correspondence of Wilhelmine Diefenthaeler LaBudde drew me closer to her. Academic interest evolved into personal involvement, till finally Mrs. LaBudde came to life and I looked forward to each day in the archives with passionate intensity. Those who knew her described her personality as magnetic. It must have been true. Her 60-year-old letters still draw attention.





For me, Mrs. LaBudde's work still lives through the fruits of ideas she planted during a quarter century of environmental activism. Touching the fading documents that she touched decades earlier, I let her words reach across the years and guide me on a tour of the golden years of Wisconsin conservation history.

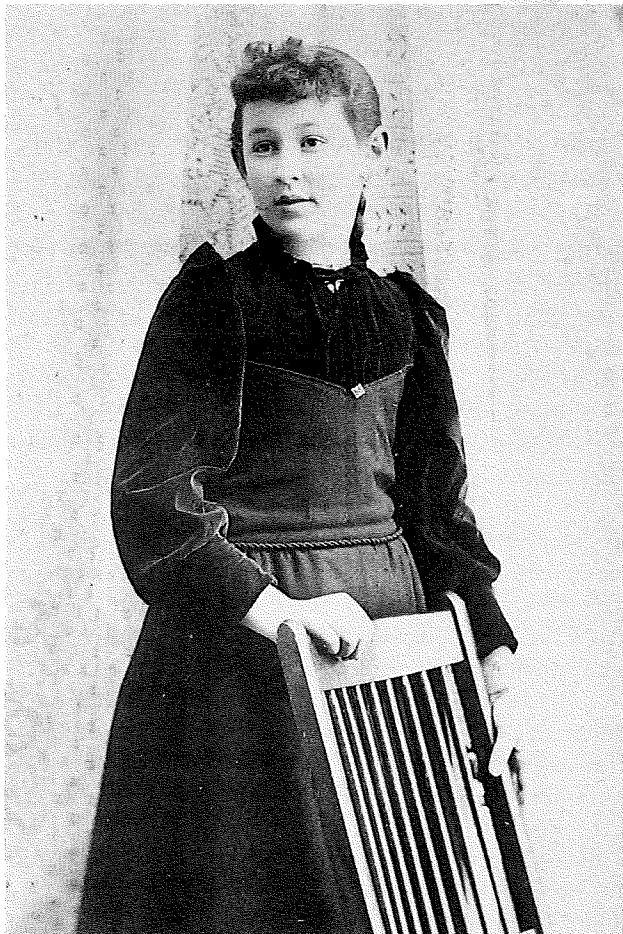
That tour began with her involvement in two "save the marsh" projects in the closing years of the 1920s. Louis "Curley" Radke of the Izaak Walton League enlisted LaBudde's help to restore the Horicon Marsh. Through the seven years that Radke struggled with legislators over this issue, she support-

ed his positions. LaBudde chaired the Conservation Committee of the Milwaukee County Federation of Women's Clubs. She rallied the club women to lobby their legislators in support of Radke's efforts. Similarly, LaBudde's letters show that she was likely the individual who interested Charles Broughton, then editor of the Sheboygan Press, in mounting his campaign to save the Sheboygan (Broughton) Marsh.

proud when she became the first woman elected to the Conservation Congress, impatient when she tracked off onto some foolhardy tangent (which she was prone to do), and exhausted when one of her political campaigns ended in defeat or illness (she was given to fragile health). In retrospect, one of her successful

(left) Kindergarten classes explore a managed forest at the Madison School Forest in Verona. In the 1930s and 40s women's clubs were strong lobbyists for establishing such teaching forests and incorporating resource conservation in school courses.

(below and right) Wilhelmine "Minnie" Difenthaler in adolescence. She was college-educated at Grafton Hall in Fond du Lac. Family interests included wildflowers and music. She married her neighborhood sweetheart from Elkhart Lake, Edward LaBudde.



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Through her letters I made the acquaintance of many of the "greats" of Wisconsin conservation history: Harley MacKenzie, Owen Gromme, Pearl Pohl, Fred Schmeckle and Aldo Leopold, to name a few. Our trail crisscrossed the major resource management issues of the day — forest restoration, marsh restoration, highway beautification, predator protection, soil conservation, pesticide use and Civilian Conservation Corps projects.

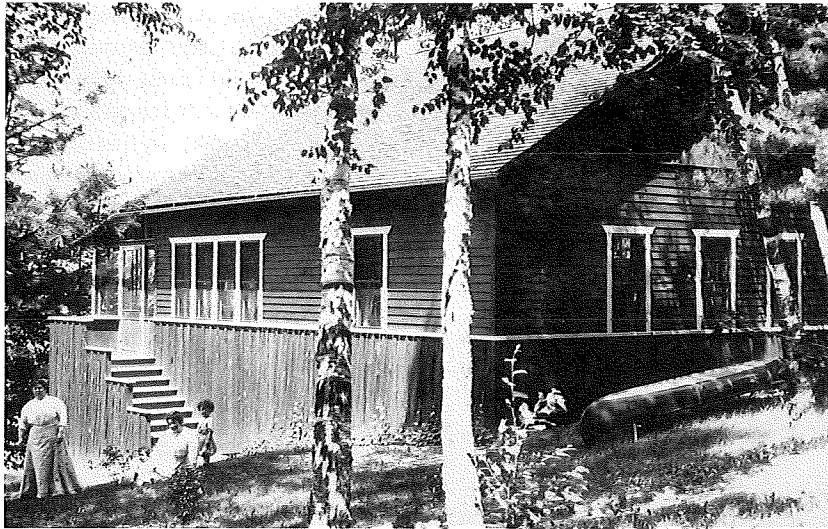
Along the way, I shared her triumphs and failures. I was

campaigns had the farthest reaching consequences for the citizens of Wisconsin: the establishment of conservation education as part of the public school curriculum.

The first evidence in her letters of an interest in outdoor education surfaced in a 1929 correspondence to Governor Walter Kohler. She wrote:

"Now that both houses have passed the bill providing such a generous budget for conservation (and, of course you will sign it), we women feel that enough funds are available for our long felt need of an education program.

"As you know we want a woman to act as the assistant to the director of conservation; who will go into the public schools as visiting instructor, who will speak in summer schools, at farmer's institutes, on all other official and voluntary groups as the occasion demands.



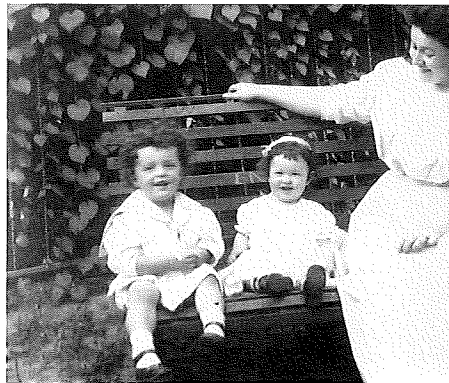
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(above) The LaBudde family home on Pine Point of Elkhart Lake.

(right) Family shots with Mrs. LaBudde's two oldest children George and Margaret ("Totsie"). Once the children were raised, Mrs. LaBudde campaigned for human rights, education and conservation causes.

(opposite) Mrs. LaBudde was both accomplished pianist and composer. The LaBudde parlor became popular as they owned one of the only pianos on Elkhart Lake.



"In short she is to go up and down the length and breadth of the state, and preach the love of nature and outdoor beauty to young and old — only so will it get into the hearts of our citizens."

LaBudde was advocating establishing an information specialist within the Conservation Department. She wanted the specialist to be a female, I suspect due to her friendship with Margaret March-Mount, a public information officer with Region 9 of the U.S. Forest Service. March-Mount was a liaison to the women's clubs and the schools. The school children called her the "tree lady." Perhaps LaBudde viewed the position as a model for the Conservation Department.

Not satisfied to attack this issue on one front only, LaBudde started political activity on three other approaches. In 1930, she began a campaign for wide-

spread observance of Bird and Arbor Day in Milwaukee. She attempted to convince the Milwaukee County Board to establish a conservation high school in Milwaukee at Boy's Technical School. Third, she began a movement to place conservation education on the agenda of the State Teachers Association annual meeting.

This last strategy represented a change of heart. In her early letters, LaBudde despaired that conservation education would likely never be administered through the Department of Public Instruction because the school curriculum was already crowded.

In 1932, LaBudde was involved in forming the Wisconsin Association for Conservation Education. The group's executive committee consisted of 21 of the state's prominent figures in conservation, including Judge Henry Graass

of Green Bay, D.C. Everest of Rothchild, and H.J. Parmley of the Boy's Technical School of Milwaukee. Their purpose? To encourage conservation education in all public schools. They began by writing letters to 500 school districts statewide to solicit ideas and to assess interest in conservation education.

In 1933, the Conservation Division of the State Federation of Women's Clubs launched a statewide campaign to broaden the system of school forests across the state. These locally-owned and managed forests provided accessible outdoor laboratories to teach children about forestry. The LaBudde letters indicate that the La Crosse Women's Club was the first to succeed (not the first school forest, but the first secured by the women's lobbying effort). Four hundred and fourteen school forests thrive across the state as a result of



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these efforts.

By 1935, the campaign to introduce conservation education in the schools intensified, and Wilhelmine LaBudde was in the thick of it. In January of that year, Conservation Department director Harley MacKenzie met with conservation-minded individuals in Milwaukee to discuss drafting legislation. By February, MacKenzie had written to E.J. McKean of Tomah, president of the Wisconsin Teacher's Association, advocating that McKean try to obtain the services of Jay "Ding" Darling, Chief of the Biological Survey, to speak as the annual teacher's convention. MacKenzie believed an inspiring speaker would help build support among the teachers. [Darling's famous political cartoons had advocated resource conservation for decades.]

Early in April, State Senator G. Erle Ingram introduced Bill 319S to require the teaching of conservation of natural resources at the state teachers colleges, normal schools and high schools. The bill's provisions had been drafted by members of the conservation community, and they began an intensive lobbying effort.

In an ironic twist, the State Federation of Women's Clubs did not endorse the bill. Apparently the vice president of the Federation, Lucia R. Briggs of Milwaukee-Downer College, spoke against the bill at the Federation's state board meeting in February. Her position as an educator must have swayed the other board members to side with her. LaBudde continued to lobby for the legislation in her capacity as executive committee member of the Wisconsin Association for Conservation Education. Still, she was rebuked by some of the Federation women and her activities caused some dissension in the group. Haskell Noyes of the Milwaukee Chapter of the Izaak Walton League, a group which supported the bill, offered the following if LaBudde's troubles with the Federation could not be cleared up:

"...you can resign from your committee and I will see to it that you are made an honorary member of the Milwaukee Chapter (of the Ikes) and you will then have the distinction of being

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In short, she is to go up and down the length and breadth of the state, and preach the love of nature and outdoor beauty to young and old - only so will it get into the hearts of our citizens.

... Long after many other laws have been forgotten posterity will look back to the time when a state of these United States first took cognizance of the fact that it was important to create a conservation consciousness for its citizenry, and that it lay within the power of the institution of learning to inculcate into the public mind an awareness that a state, country, or nation's health, happiness and social security depends directly and entirely upon the proper use of its natural resources.

Mrs. LaBudde dedicates the LaBudde Grove, a forested tract in the Nicolet Forest east of Eagle River. It was planted in the 1930s when club women raised funds to reforest many areas during the George Washington Bicentennial (1932).



the one and only female member in its history."

Of course, LaBudde would not have been nearly so important an ally to the Ikes had she had not been affiliated with the women's clubs. Fortunately the resignation did not become necessary, but the Federation never endorsed the legislation.

During July and August, the bill ground through legislative committees. It passed both houses late in the summer and Governor Philip LaFollette signed Chapter 445 Laws of 1935 on September 16. In her "thank-you" letter to the governor, LaBudde wrote:

"We conservationists feel that this is probably the best bit of legislation ever passed by our state legislature. Long after many other laws have been forgotten posterity will look back to the time when a state of these United States first took cognizance of the fact that it was important to create a conservation consciousness for its citizenry, and that it lay within the power of the institutions of learning to inculcate into the public mind an awareness that a state, country, or nation's health, happiness and social security depends directly and entirely upon the proper use of its natural resources."

Even as she enjoyed the victory, LaBudde's thank-you letter lobbied the governor on another of her myriad issues. That was typical. LaBudde was determined to make the most of every opportunity.

Over the course of the summer and fall of 1990, I continued my study of LaBudde's 30-year involvement in the resource management issues. As I progressed to the file folders of the 1950s, her letters became fewer in number. Her health and energy began to wane. When I read the last page in the last file of the last box, I fought back a tightening in my throat. As I closed the file, I sat quietly in the archives and felt very much alone. She was gone, and I grieved her passing.

Yet, Wilhelmine LaBudde is not really gone. Children all over the state still enjoy school forest outings. Budding teachers learn how to incorporate environmental education into their curricula. Elementary and high school students gain insight that help them make

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JEAN B. MEYER



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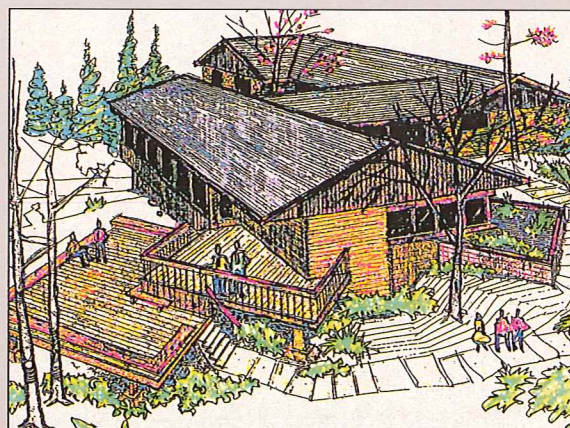
(top) Students mix art and science by making rubbings with natural plant dyes. LaBudde encouraged such activities to bring "a love of nature and outdoor beauty to young and old."

(above) In the fifties at her Pine Point home.

better personal environmental decision. These opportunities have been made available by the acts of various legislatures and governors, but they have their roots in the acts of a few conservationists of the 1930s, Wilhelmine LaBudde among them. □

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Remembering the great ones



Architectural concept for the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

In a wooded setting just off Highway 51 in Stevens Point, a small cluster of stylish buildings and decks provides a relaxing setting to learn about the men and women who built a conservation heritage in Wisconsin. Here, foresters, writers, researchers, lawyers and educators are honored for their lasting contributions to science, public policy and public understanding that natural resources warrant protection.

The 21 people enshrined in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame since 1985, including Wilhelmine LaBudde, came from different backgrounds and different walks of life. Their diverse interests, like natural diversity, rebuilt lands, wetlands and waters that were ravaged only 100

years earlier.

An expansion from the original hall of fame building will eventually house 1,200 square feet of exhibits and displays. Visitors will take a historical journey through northern Wisconsin as the massive white pinery was logged and exploited. A trip by lumber raft will drift past 100 years of Wisconsin

settlement. You'll have to hang onto your hats as wardens take you along on a deer poaching bust from the 1930s. A stop at a restored CCC camp will tell tales of reforestation. A final stop will describe current and emerging conservation issues.

Two of the exhibits are under construction and the rest will be finished as finances allow. Students from the neighboring College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point are building the exhibits with professional guidance.

To help sponsor the construction or to nominate a candidate for the hall of fame, contact the Wisconsin Hall of Fame, P.O. Box 942, Stevens Point, WI 54481 or telephone (715) 341-1022.

